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COUNCIL OF  
AUSTRALASIAN  
MUSEUM  
DIRECTORS

**Discontinuation of ABS support for cultural  
and recreation statistics collection  
and analysis**

2 October 2014

## **INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the recent announcement by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) of its decision to discontinue funding support for cultural and recreation statistics collection and analysis.

The following comments are provided by the Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD) on behalf of its members. CAMD represents the major national, state and regional museums in Australia and New Zealand with museums, science centres and heritage houses in over 60 different locations. A list of CAMD's members and museum sites has been provided separately.

### **Lack of Museum Sector Data**

For some time, CAMD and other museum sector organisations have been liaising with the ABS and other bodies concerning the widening gap in statistical information concerning the museum sector. CAMD was particularly concerned that there appeared to be no plan for ongoing collection of data on cultural industries such as museums.

The recent decision by the ABS to discontinue its whole cultural and recreation statistics program only serves to exacerbate a serious and continuing problem for the museum sector in mapping the changing size, nature and impact of museums.

### **Service Industry Surveys**

The available data sources on museums Australia-wide are currently up to 6 years old. The former ABS Service Industry Surveys (SIS) covering the collection sector, which were carried out on a 3-4 year basis with the cooperation of museums, were seen as extremely useful to the sector in providing an aggregated picture of different collection domains. There has not been a dedicated industry survey of museums since 2007-08 when this collection was discontinued.

The absence of SIS information has meant that the ABS was relying instead on the Household Survey, particularly in regard to attendances. CAMD has noted in the past that

the methodology used for this survey has tended to underestimate attendances (particularly as it did not record data relating to visitors under 15 or non-residents such as international tourists) thereby overlooking two significant groups of museum patrons. The data gathered, however, did provide important benchmark data for the more than 1,000 museums in the sector across Australia.

### **CAMD Surveys**

CAMD collects data from its members annually on a range of indicators to assist in their benchmarking activities and to measure the beneficial impact of major museums on their communities. The CAMD survey has been refined over the last few years to ensure that its definition of 'visits' and other indicators aligns with the definition used for the national cultural indicators.

### **Rest of the Sector**

The CAMD survey, however, covers only a small segment of the museum sector. It does not survey other museums in Australia; we know from ABS figures that at the end of June 2008 there were at least 1,184 museums operating from 1,456 locations across Australia. These museums operate in different government jurisdictions, have collections with a wide breadth of collection focus and exist in sites across Australia's cities and rural regions. Their disparate nature means that there is no one common network along which data can be collected and shared. Information about their operations and impact is no longer being collected across Australia by any official body.

### **Australia Council**

CAMD would point out that the museum sector (with the exception of galleries) is not part of the remit of the Australia Council and therefore is unable to take advantage of its capacity to map and analyse the visual and performing arts in Australia through its statistical branch.

### **CAMD use of ABS data**

CAMD and its constituent museums have relied on the various publications produced by the ABS to provide information for use in internal planning and programming and to provide context and benchmarks for discussion with potential supporters, both public and private, on a wide range of issues over the years. The availability of ABS publications has allowed comparisons to be drawn for example in relation to:

- children's involvement in various cultural areas;
- the involvement and preferences of different age groups in relation to cultural activities;
- attendance rates at various cultural events;

- income generated by museums;
- the proportion of funding provided by different jurisdictions;
- trends in funding by governments and through sponsorships; and
- the size and nature of the museum industry in terms of staff.

## **Value of the Sector**

Cultural institutions such as museums are highly popular sources and presenters of cultural knowledge which reach tens of million people around Australia every year through exhibitions, touring programs, video conferencing and online sites. In 2012/13, for example, the 60 museum sites within CAMD attracted more than 16.5 million visits through their doors.

Their collections are tangible cultural assets but also in many cases contain items which are irreplaceable in their cultural significance. While a large part of Australia's material culture is held by Commonwealth, State/Territory and large regional collecting organisations, collections of great local and also state and national significance can also be found in small to medium sized museums; their continuance, often with few resources and chiefly run by volunteer staff, demonstrates the integral role they play in the shared life of their communities in regional, rural and remote Australia.

While there is no consistent and detailed survey of the economic output of the museum sector or its contribution to national economic activities, a recent CSIRO report estimated that in 2012/13 the museum sector had revenue of \$710m, over 5,000 employees and had the participation of close to 23,000 volunteers.

On any objective criteria it is clear that 'museums matter' in terms of the cultural life of the nation.

## **Recommendations**

The museum industry represents a significant part of the arts and culture sector which plays a major role in the national economy. It makes little sense socially, culturally or economically to deprive the museum industry or the broader arts and culture sector of the data it requires to measure and expand its continuing contribution to the community.

It is critical for both Government and our industry to have accurate data to use in considering the contribution of sectors and on which to base key resourcing, investment and marketing decisions.

CAMD strongly recommends to the Meeting of Cultural Ministers (MCM) that it continues to support the collection and analysis of current, comprehensive and comparable quantitative and qualitative data about museums and other domains within the arts and cultural sector.

CAMD is a member of the newly formed Museums and Galleries Australia Alliance (which also includes the Council of Australasian Art Museum Directors; Museums Australia and the International Council of Museums – Australia). It would welcome an opportunity to participate, alongside its colleagues in the Alliance, in any ongoing discussion of ways to maintain quality data for the sector.

For further information or clarification of the information contained above, please contact:

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